

THE ENTOMOLOGY OF THE "MÉNAGIER DE PARIS"

When the *Ménagier de Paris* wrote his treatise on moral and domestic economy about 1393, for the guidance of his very young bride so that she would be a perfect wife and proficient in household affairs, both desirable when she married again, he included therein what was considered, at the time, to be the best information on the control of household insects.

"*Le Ménagier de Paris*, traité de morale et d'économie domestique, composé vers 1393, par un bourgeois parisien," was recently translated for the first time into English by Eileen Power,¹ and although the limited French edition of 1846 has long been known to students of social history the economic entomology of the work is not so well known to entomologists, and the extracts reproduced here will give one a glimpse of the methods used by the citizens of Paris during the middle ages in their conflicts with fleas, flies, mosquitoes and the like.

Thus on the subject of fleas, the *Ménagier* said, "And in summer take heed that there be no fleas in your chamber, nor in your bed, the which you may do in six ways, as I have heard tell. For I have heard from several that if the room be strewn with alder leaves, the fleas will be caught thereon. Item, I have heard tell that if you have at night one or two trenchers [of bread] slimed with glue or turpentine and set about the room, with a lighted candle in the midst of each trencher, they will come and be stuck thereon. The other way that I have tried and 'tis true: take a rough cloth and spread it about your room and over your bed, and all the fleas that shall hop thereon will be caught, so that you may carry them away with the cloth wheresoe'er you will. Item, sheepskins. Item, I have seen blanchets [of white wool] set on the straw and on the bed, and when the black fleas hopped thereon, they were the sooner found upon the white, and killed. But the best way is to guard oneself against those that be within the coverlets and the furs, and the stuff of the dresses wherewith

¹ The Goodman of Paris, New York, 1928.

one is covered. For know that I have tried this, and when the coverlets, furs or dresses, wherein there be fleas, be folded and shut tightly up, as in a chest tightly corded with straps, or in a bag well tied up and pressed, or otherwise put and pressed so that the aforesaid fleas be without light and air and kept imprisoned, then they will perish forthwith and die."

On the subject of mosquitoes he was not very loquacious and mentioned only the use of smoke from burning straw and the protection afforded by mosquito netting. But on the subject of flies, he unburdened himself of many suggestions and wrote:

"And if you have a chamber or a passage where there is great resort of flies, take little sprigs of fern and tie them to threads like to tassels, and hang them up and all the flies will settle on them at eventide; then take down the tassels and throw them out. Item, shut up your chamber closely in the evening, but let there be a little opening in the wall towards the east, and as soon as the dawn breaketh, all the flies will go forth through this opening, and then let it be stopped up. Item, take a bowl of milk and a hare's gall and mix them one with another and then set two or three bowls thereof in places where the flies gather and all that taste thereof will die. Item, otherwise, have a linen rag tied at the bottom of a pot with an opening in the neck, and set that pot in the place where the flies gather and smear it within with honey, or apples, or pears; when it is full of flies, set a trencher over the mouth and then shake it. Item, otherwise, take raw red onions and bray them and pour the juice into a bowl and set it where the flies gather and all that taste thereof will die. Item, have whisks wherewith to slay them by hand. Item, have little twigs covered with glue on a basin of water. Item, have your windows shut full tight with oiled or other cloth, or with parchment or something else, so tightly that no fly may enter, and let the flies that be within be slain with the whisk or otherwise as above, and no others will come in. Item, have a string hanging soaked in honey, and the flies will come in and settle thereon and at eventide let them be taken in a bag. Finally meseemeth that flies will not stop in a room wherein there be no standing tables, forms, dressers or other things whereon they can settle and rest, for if they have naught but straight walls whereon to settle and cling,

they will not settle, nor will they in a shady or damp place. Wherefore meseemeth that if the room be well watered and well closed and shut up, and if nought be left lying on the floor, no fly will settle there.”

For the clothes moth airing and brushing were recommended. “Because such vermin gather when the cold weather of autumn and winter groweth milder and be born in the summer, at such time it behoves you to set out furs and stuffs in the sun in fair and dry weather; and if there comes a dark and damp mist and clingeth to your dresses and you fold them in such condition, that mist folded and wrapped up in your dresses will shelter and breed worse vermin than before. Wherefore choose a fine dry day and as soon as you see heavier weather coming, before that it reacheth you cause your dresses to be hung up under cover and shaken to rid of most of the dust, then cleaned by beating them with dry rods.”

His instructions on the art of gardening included a remedy for ants and cabbage caterpillars. “Note, that ants abound in a garden and if you cast sawdust of oaken planks upon their heap, they will die or depart at the first rain that falleth, for the sawdust retaineth the moisture. . . . Note, that if the caterpillars eat your cabbages, do you spread cinders beneath the cabbages when it rains and the caterpillars will die. Item, you may look under the leaves of the cabbages and there you shall find a great host of white grubs and know that it is from these that the caterpillars be born, wherefore you should cut off the leaves whereon is this seed and cast them afar off.”

Thus ends the entomological advice which the *Ménagier de Paris* gave to his wife along with lengthy instructions on religious and moral duties, womanly behavior, social duties, the subject of dress, household management, gardening, the making of sausages and candied orange peel, etc., etc., etc., all designed to transform her into a paragon of uncomplaining submissiveness and continued attentiveness—and to preserve and keep *Le Ménagier* from all discomforts.—HARRY B. WEISS.